



STATE OF MICHIGAN

KALAMAZOO COUNTY DISTRICT COURT

PAUL J. BRIDENSTINE 227 W. MICHIGAN KALAMAZOO, MI 49007 PHONE (269) 384-8171 FAX (269) 384-8047

To: Hon. William Vanregenmorter, House Judiciary Committee Chairman
From: Paul J. Bridenstine, Chief District Judge, Kalamazoo 8th District Court
Re: **Senate Bill 193**
Date: June 22, 2005

Thank you Mr. Chairman for allowing me to speak concerning SB 193.

Mr. Chairman, last November, this Committee approved what was SB 1463 eliminating the current election boundaries existing within the 8th District Court in Kalamazoo County. Despite eventual passage from the full House and Senate, Governor Granholm chose not to act on the proposal before the end of last term.

Since last year, a few things have changed. First, the 8th District Court has received one new judge, Anne Blatchford. Judge Blatchford joins all the other members of the bench in full agreement with this legislation.

Another factor is that the principal local governments, the City of Kalamazoo, the City of Portage and the County of Kalamazoo have now had a number of months to ponder this proposal. As I understand it, both the City of Portage and the County of Kalamazoo have passed resolutions in support of the bill. I also understand that City of Kalamazoo Administration has indicated they do not have concerns about the bill; however, it has not formally come before the City Commission for comment.

Another factor is that a number of interested organizations have now weighed in on the proposal. The Kalamazoo County Bar Association has voted in favor of the bill, as has the Michigan District Judges Association. I also understand that the State Bar of Michigan agrees with the legislation and that the State Court Administrative Office supports the legislation.

Let me refresh your recollection of what we are talking about. Legislation passed six years ago created the consolidated Kalamazoo County 8th District Court. Prior to this, there were three separate District Courts within the County. In passing the 1999 legislation, the seven judges were given countywide

jurisdiction. However, the legislation preserved the original election districts; i.e., one judge elected by the citizens of the City of Portage, four from the City of Kalamazoo, and two from the remainder of the County.

I was not a judge at the time the legislation passed and therefore I do not have personal knowledge of the reasons why the election districts were maintained. However, as the Chief Judge of the District Court and elected solely by the citizens of the City of Kalamazoo, I do believe that the reasons to eliminate those boundaries are persuasive. First, all seven judges enjoy countywide jurisdiction. Due to scheduling, facilities and necessary efficiencies, each judge regularly handles matters from areas outside their election district. Therefore, it is wholly appropriate that the voters of the entire county be permitted to elect all the judges that serve their county.

The issue is highlighted by the fact that frequently local citizen-litigants are before judges whom they have no ability to elect or not elect. As a result, a genuine concern about judicial accountability exists. This is one of the principle reasons why the judges themselves believe it is in the community's best interest to make the proposed change. That is, the judges want to be assured that they are held accountable to the entire community they serve, including every neighborhood.

Second, as the fifteen-member judiciary in Kalamazoo ponders the suitability of a concurrent jurisdiction plan for Kalamazoo County, to maintain consistency with the three county-elected Probate and five county-elected Circuit Judges, the District Court should be in a similar position from an election standpoint.

Finally, as we witnessed last year in discussions about eliminating a judgeship, any further attempts to eliminate or add a District Court judgeship within Kalamazoo County could pit communities against one another if the current election districts remained intact.

As I stated earlier, the entire District Court bench is in agreement on this legislation. For all of these reasons, I ask that you give SB 193 serious consideration and pass it as it has been submitted. Thank you.